

**Picos de Europa 15<sup>th</sup> May – 19<sup>th</sup> May**  
**Tony Moverley & Tony Benton**

**Thursday 15<sup>th</sup> May**

We flew with Easyjet from London Stansted to Asturias for a 5 day, 4 night visit to the Picos de Europa in Northern Spain. On departing the airport, we immediately saw a hovering raptor in silhouette – nowhere to stop and it wasn't until some time later that we exhausted the possibilities to just one – a Short-toed Eagle. On our leisurely 3 hour drive from the airport to our guesthouse, we recorded Mallard, Black Kite, Common Buzzard, Kestrel, Blackbird, Collared Dove, Blackcap, Carrion Crow, Goldfinch, Yellow-legged Gull, Swallow, Magpie and several Griffon Vultures.

We were warmly welcomed by our hosts Lisa and Mike Stuart, owners of the very pleasant and rustic guesthouse [Casa Gustavo](#). This was ideally located in the tiny hamlet of Aliezo, set in an elevated position overlooking the outskirts of Potes in the heart of the Eastern Picos. A walk up the lane towards the even smaller settlement of Llayo, added Black Redstart, House Sparrow, Spotted Flycatcher, Blue Tit, Woodpigeon, Common Redstart, Cirl Bunting, House Martin, Common Swift and Great Tit to our first day's list.

**Friday 16<sup>th</sup> May**

Although the weather forecast for the day (and for the remainder of our stay) was not inspiring, we decided to head for Fuente Dé to ride the cable car (€8 single / €14 return) up into the high mountains and snow, and then to walk back down via Espinama to the lower cable car station (well described in all the guide books).

Although we ascended into cloud and emerged from the top station in mist, it soon cleared as we walked away. In search of 3 'target' species, Wallcreeper, Snow Finch and Rock Thrush, we took the left turn in a NW direction to the 'traditional' Wallcreeper site, past the pools down on the left. We were thrilled to see 100+ Alpine Choughs in large flocks high up over the towering crags while several Black Redstart and Northern Wheatear kept us entertained. Several Alpine Accentors were seen after a while. We must have searched the area for well over an hour without success before turning around and re-joining the route back. As we lost ground, we noted that Alpine Chough were outnumbered by Red-billed Chough which also formed large flocks at the lower elevations. One Red-billed Chough had a colour ring but we were unable to record any details before it flew off. We were accompanied by many Linnet and had excellent views of Water Pipit along the stream as we descended towards Espinama. As we approached the valley floor, we saw Chaffinch, Tree Pipit, House Martin, Blackcap, Marsh Tit, Wren, Robin, Raven and Serin. We had been told that the wood along the footpath connecting Espinama and Pido was good for Black Woodpecker. However, it was early evening by the time we got there and tired legs and the lure of refreshment back at the guesthouse meant that we made little effort for this elusive Woodpecker.

**Saturday 17<sup>th</sup> May**

Parking at the rural hamlet of Pombes (turn right off the road travelling from Potes to Espinama, about 1 mile after Los Llanos and park by the church on the village approach), we went in search Pied Flycatchers and Middle-spotted Woodpeckers. By keeping to the right through the hamlet, we soon found the steep track up to reach the high level footpath PR-22 which runs in an East-West direction beneath the towering Pico del Joracón de la Miel. Orchid-filled meadows and two soaring Honey Buzzards gave way to mature oak woodland which was still not in full leaf. We soon found a warbler which wasn't immediately obvious to us – but good views and song gave away its identity as Bonelli's. It wasn't long before a Pied Flycatcher came into view and we must have seen well over twenty individuals during the day. A close encounter with a Woodpecker wasn't unfortunately quite close enough to confirm Middle-spotted while a Wryneck was heard but not seen; other sightings included Sparrowhawk, Nuthatch, Crag Martin, Yellowhammer, Song Thrush and Long-tailed Tit.

On our return we stopped off for an early evening drink in Potes and, by peering over the main bridge into the fast flowing river, we added Dipper and Grey Wagtail. Later, a stroll up the lane from our guesthouse before dinner yielded excellent views of Firecrest.

### **Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> May**

A pre-breakfast amble gave us a splendid Wryneck in the tilled gardens, 150m up from the guesthouse. The weather down in the valley looked good so we decided to venture back up the Fuente Dé cable car to try our luck again for the 3 'targets'; but this time we would venture off the main tracks to find quieter habitats. Unfortunately, visibility was generally poor, with mist, rain and snow hampering our efforts. We failed again to find Wallcreeper, Snow Finch or Rock Thrush but were rewarded with very close-up views of Alpine Accentors, three of which were colour-ringed. Subsequently we have discovered that the study started in 2003 and that a total of 380 accentors have been colour ringed, by trapping and finding chicks in the nest.

By mid-afternoon, we had had enough and ventured down, via cable car, into the valley where it was also raining. Around the pine trees surrounding the lower cable car station, we saw Firecrest, Coal Tit, Nuthatch, Goldcrest and Long-tailed Tit. En route home; we made a small detour to the village of Brez where trip reports had indicated the possibility of Middle-spotted Woodpecker. Parking just before the village, we wandered up the road towards the settlement to hear a Quail calling down below us in the fields. Cirl Bunting, Spotted Flycatchers, Stonechats and Greenfinch were present but we failed to see or hear any Woodpeckers.

### **Monday 19<sup>th</sup> May**

A fellow guest had recommended a 'raptor watchpoint' just a few km north of our guesthouse. Parking just beyond the turn to the village of Pendes (about 7km north of Potes), a Wryneck and Mistle Thrush were seen as we walked east along and up a well defined track which gave panoramic views over the surrounding valleys. Three Egyptian vultures (two adults and a sub-adult) circled around while a Short-toed Eagle hovered in the distance and was joined by a Booted Eagle and a Kestrel. Alpine Swifts circled overhead.

We had plenty of time before we needed to be at Santander airport for our flight home, so we stopped at an orchid site (park in lay-by on the eastern side of the main road N-621 just south of the mouth of the Hermida Gorge) and walked up the track signposted to Lebeña. A Wood White and two Adonis Blues butterflies were seen and, after a 20 minute stroll, the trackside was littered with spikes of Man Orchid (*Aceras anthroporum*). Fantastic.

We then drove to the coastal town of San Vicente for an eagerly awaited lunch of superbly fresh 'sardinas'. On a fast rising tide, the estuary appeared to have very little on it apart from a few Yellow-legged and Lesser BB gulls plus a Little Egret. A walk on the beach on the eastern side of the estuary produced a mixed flock of Dunlin and Ringed Plover on the breakwater, a Cetti's Warbler was heard behind the beach and a few spikes of Pink Butterfly orchids (*Orchis papilionacea*) were found on the dunes.

1. Cormorant – 1 at sea from San Vicente beach
2. Grey Heron – 1 from departing aircraft at Santander
3. Little Egret – 1 at San Vicente estuary
4. White Stork – 1 flying near San Vicente
5. Mallard – in flight near Asturias airport
6. Griffon Vulture – many
7. Egyptian Vulture – 3 at Pendes
8. Short-toed Eagle – 1 at Pendes (& possibly one at Asturias airport)
9. Booted Eagle – 1 at Pendes
10. Black Kite – just two– travelling to and from airports
11. Common Buzzard – abundant in the lower levels of the valley
12. Honey Buzzard – just outside Pembes
13. Sparrowhawk – above Pembes
14. Kestrel – several seen at various locations
15. Quail – heard near Brez
16. Coot – on pools on the outskirts of Santander
17. Ringed Plover – 20+ Dunlin on beach at San Vicente
18. Dunlin – 20+ with Ringed Plover on beach at San Vicente
19. Yellow-legged Gull – common on coast
20. Lesser Black-backed Gull – San Vicente estuary
21. Woodpigeon – abundant

22. Collared Dove – one travelling from airport
23. Feral Pigeon
24. Cuckoo (heard by our walking friends)
25. Common Swift - abundant
26. Alpine Swift – several flying near Pendes
27. Wryneck - above Pembes and at Pendes
28. Crag Martin - above Pembes
29. Barn Swallow - abundant
30. House Martin - abundant
31. Water Pipit – easily seen walking from top cable car station to Espinama
32. Tree Pipit – abundant in suitable habitat
33. White Wagtail (abundant)
34. Grey Wagtail – on the river at Potes
35. Wren - abundant
36. Dipper – on the river at Potes
37. Dunnock - one at Pendes
38. Alpine Accentor – 5+ on both days around the top cable car station at Furnte Dé
39. Robin - abundant
40. Common Redstart - abundant
41. Black Redstart - abundant
42. Northern Wheatear – several around the top cable car station
43. Stonechat - abundant
44. Song Thrush – 1 near Llaves (NE of Pembes)
45. Mistle Thrush – 1 at Pendes
46. Blackbird – common
47. Blackcap – the most common Warbler
48. Cetti's Warbler – on beach at San Vicente
49. Bonelli's Warbler – 1 in oak woods above Pembes
50. Goldcrest – at Fuente Dé and Casa Gustavo
51. Firecrest – Casa Gustavo
52. Spotted Flycatcher – Casa Gustavo and Brez
53. Pied Flycatcher -20+ in the oak woods above Pembes
54. Great Tit – abundant
55. Coal Tit – at Fuente Dé
56. Blue Tit - abundant
57. Marsh Tit – in woods near Espinama
58. Long-tailed Tit – near Llaves (NE of Pembes)
59. Nuthatch – above Pembes
60. Magpie – one travelling from airport
61. Jay - abundant
62. (Red-billed) Chough – 50+ in the area 1 to 2km SE of the top cable car station
63. Alpine Chough – 100+ above crags at top cable car station
64. Carrion Crow - plentiful
65. Raven - abundant
66. Spotless Starling – reasonably abundant outside of the Picos
67. House Sparrow – abundant in villages
68. Chaffinch - abundant
69. Linnet – abundant at the higher levels
70. Goldfinch – just one at a stop N of the Hermida Gorge
71. Greenfinch - Brez
72. Serin – abundant
73. Yellowhammer – above Pembes
74. Cirl Bunting – at Casa Gustavo and Brez